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The Mystique of Customers' Saturation in Online Brand Communities

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Abstract

Most research studies in the area of online brand communities have largely studied the positive aspects of online brand communities, ignoring the negative influences, mainly the growing threat from customers' saturation within these communities. Given the lack of understanding on the concept of customer saturation in online brand communities, this study establishes the necessary early understanding on this important concept by combining various streams of marketing and brand literature as well as information system. This study enhances understanding through the development of five propositions focusing on the role of customers' saturation on (1) customers' experience within online brand communities, (2) brand relationship, and (3) the co-creation of value. The discussion and review of the current literature produces five important propositions. The propositions develop the direction that customer saturation in online brand communities is likely to impact three key areas.

Keywords: saturation, online brand community, brand relationship, customer experience, co-creation of value

1. Introduction

Establishing and maintaining close interpersonal relationships is an essential need for humans [1]. However, close interpersonal relationships are not limited to the type of dyadic relationships in which people choose to engage with and maintain. The brand relationship literature has shown that people choose to enter relationships with brands just as they do with other people [2, 3]. Consumer's behavior theories have also shown that people form self-brand connections [4]. Brands are found to help customers articulate their identities [5] and form relationships with them as they offer two main resources [6]. First, brands offer

the actual benefits that are realized from using the product or service. Second, brands offer something special or unique about the customer to others around his/her social circle [7]. Therefore, brands can offer social capital/resources in different forms including status created by brand possession and recognition by others as well as brand's self-expressiveness allowing customers to express their identity.

In 2013, approximately 86% of marketers were using social media as a key component in their marketing initiatives to connect with consumers who themselves are becoming reliant on the social platform to learn and interact with brands [8]. Nonetheless, an evaluation needs to be conducted on the risks that social media presents as there appears to be evidence that people are becoming overwhelmed with the fast paced world we are living in today [9].

Despite the increasing number of studies on brand relationship on online brand communities [10, 11], there seems to be no attention paid to the growing serious challenge arising from customers' saturation in online brand communities that impose direct risk to consumer's behavior, brand relationship, and value creation in these communities. This is mainly due to the mainstream academic research that has focused on the positive sides of online brand communities while missing the potential risks this channel might present as it gains in popularity and becomes saturated. This chapter provides thorough examination of the literature on customers' saturation in online communities and its relation to brand relationship and firms' ability to create and maintain value through their online brand communities. Due to the limited understanding in marketing on customers' saturation in online communities and its negative effects on brand relationship, the chapter combines consumer's behavior insights from the literature on brand relationship and customer saturation (mainly developed from the information system (IS) literature). The aim of this chapter is to enhance our current limited theoretical understanding on the relationship between customers' saturation in online communities and brand relationship, and ultimately firms' abilities to engage customers in continuous value co-creation.

2. Customer saturation

Saturation is defined as a communication overload [12], driven by information quantity [9, 13, 14] and the high number of the channels or communities people engage in [15]. Consequently, there is a threshold to the number of relationships, consumers can maintain with other entities such as fellow online members or brands [16, 17]. In the social psychology literature, saturation refers to *"the communication overload experienced by group members in centralized positions in communications networks"* [12]. Saturated members of online brand communities have to compensate for the side effect of the *"message dense"* online community by filtering and blocking the information source as well as investing less time in it [9], resulting in less engagement with the brand and driving potentially members to switch communities influencing consumer's behavior. Recent developments in social media show that there are two types of saturation as reviewed in the information management literature: message unit saturation and channel saturation [15]. Message unit saturation refers to *"the number of messages received on a channel, at the point of overload for the receiver"* while channel saturation refers to

“the number of different methods of receiving input” [15]. In [15] view, these two saturation types are correlated as the number of messages a person reads is influenced by the number of channels he is receiving the messages from. However, given the lack of understanding in the marketing literature and the serious effect of saturation on customers' experience in online brand communities, there is an urgency to provide overarching understanding of the effect of saturation on brand relationship.

3. Online communities

With the advent of information technology and the Internet, online communities started gaining popularity among users. With their fast proliferation, scholars became interested in the different aspects that online communities present. While the focus started first on the technical aspect of these communities [18, 19], much of the literature covered the socio-psychological dimension [20–22]. It was only in 1997 [23] that online communities started to being looked at from a commercial perspective [24–27].

The term “online community” implies by itself a real social presence taking into account the effects on members'/consumers' attitudes and behaviors [21, 28]. Wellman and Gulia [29], Haythornthwaite et al. [30], and Preece [20] defined online communities from a social perspective as being a relational community concerned primarily with social interaction among its members. Others such as Hagel and Armstrong [23] established a more commercial view of online communities, which they saw as a potential business model and a new platform for marketers to influence consumer's behavior. Through this commercial view, online communities were seen as a source for stronger brand-consumer relationships [11, 24, 31] and higher revenues [32–35].

4. The development of brand relationship in online communities

With the rapid commercialization of the Internet, companies started to establish their online presence through standard websites [36]. However, content-oriented websites realized that the addition of an online community feature would influence consumers' behavior through attracting further users, hence make their site more profitable [35, 37]. These online communities' users were found to be viewing four times as many pages each session, were twice as likely to return, and were responsible for two-thirds of all purchases at commercial sites [37, 38]. The degree of the online communities' success on inducing consumer's behavior through increasing website traffic and user loyalty led the interest in forming the commercial viewpoint where online communities are both socially and economically successful [37, 38].

Commercially oriented online communities generate value through increasing sales [32, 34] and increasing website traffic [39]. They can lead to stronger brand-consumer relationships [24, 31, 40], higher advertising and transaction fee revenue [33], a better product support and service delivery [41], a more effective market segmentation [42], and new product development [43–48].

Firms are increasingly implementing an online community strategy aiming at generating greater revenues and profits. These firms found that the more actively people use an online community, the more they tend to visit the site that maintains it and buy goods and services there [34, 35]. For example, participants in online communities on eBay were found to be spending 54% more money than nonmembers [49]. Online communities can also be profit centers through monthly fees charged on members using the community as well as from the direct advertising that comes from within the community and on the same site hosting it [33, 39].

Online communities change the balance of power in commercial transactions toward the customer through the reduction or elimination of the information advantages that vendors enjoy [23], which on the other hand impacts the consumer's behavior in decision-making. Nonetheless, customer demand expanded for the organization's products and services through the expansion of online brand communities' usage [34, 48] as well as from the positive word of mouth generated by members of the online community [50] through cultivating consumers' ownership experience in brand communities [31].

5. Value co-creation

Despite the shift of balance toward customers [51, 52], firms that are not embracing the social conversation with their consumers or fail to manage their online brand communities and their presence on social media may in the long-term lose market share and competitiveness [53]. The majority of firms nowadays are focusing on driving further the engagement with their consumers to build on the latter's social recommendations with their peers [49, 54]. While the values of online brand communities to firms are well established [55], the literature on online brand communities has not examined fully the intermediary role these communities play between brands and customers. Importantly, as social networking sites use their platforms to monetize the generated data from all the social conversations into value co-creation activities [56, 57], brands that need to pay attention to the growing threat customer saturation can cause to such activities as well as to their online brand perception and engagement. Thus, customers' experience in online brand communities becomes essential to the success of the brand-consumer relationship and its ability to influence consumers' behavior by engaging customers in value co-creation [58, 59]. However, customers' experience and satisfaction in online brand communities are largely influenced by the degree to which customers/members feel saturated.

6. The degradation of the customer's experience in online brand communities: the saturation issue

Over 50% of the world's population is under 30 years old, with 96% of them already have joined a social network [49]. On Facebook alone, approximately one billion pieces of content are shared on a daily basis [60]. As brands are using consumers to become message senders

in this platform, users are also starting to be viewed as spam sources where most of the posts are considered to be irrelevant and pointless, increasing further the information overload [61].

Similarly in a marketing context, while more information may lead to better decision [62, 63], studies by Jacoby et al. [64, 65] demonstrated that the quantity of brand information, through the number of brands and number of their attributes affects, negatively affects brand choice decisions, leading to poorer decision-making and dysfunctional performance [66]. On that end, Shenk [9, p. 400] argued that *"as the amount of information and competing claims stretches toward infinity, the concern is that we may be on the verge of a whole new wave of indecisiveness paralysis by analysis."* Through this it is argued that while technology can speed up efficiency and productivity, it will limit rational thinking [9] and lead to choice overload [67, 68].

Information overload has also been demonstrated to affect the quality of the information, whereby Keller and Staelin [69] found that when the quantity of the information increases, information quality and hence decision accuracy was negatively affected. The perception of the system's quality (provider of the platform for the online community) is also affected where it is usually viewed as the source of the information overload problem [70].

Customer saturation can be generated as well from time pressure and is closely related to information load as when the time required to process information exceeds the available time, information overload occurs [71]. Time constraint refers to the problem of time availability. Time pressure has been studied under different contexts but mainly on decision-making [72, 73]. Time constraint occurs when people feel that they have less time, thus the feeling of not being able to do the tasks they actually want to do [73]. Time availability has been looked at mainly through a monetary value as a measure of search costs, whereby the less time available, the more the value of time [74, 75]. The value of time is measured as perceived time availability, thus depends mainly on the subjective feeling of the person.

On the basis of above facts we describe customers' saturation as being the feeling of annoyance and discontentment customers have, which is mainly caused by the sheer volume of information they need to process (whether the flow of information is brand-consumer, consumer-brand, or consumer-consumer generated) under a perceived growing time pressure that reduces their ability to comfortably engage with the community. Given that there are no direct marketing studies on the effect from saturation on users' experience and behavior of online communities', theoretical examination of consumer's behavior insights from different disciplines in relationship to customer saturation and its potential impact on customer online experience needs to be made.

7. Propositions development

Despite the limited studies that have tackled specific issues on information overload and its diverse effects on other variables such as online members' participation [76], member choice quality [67, 68], and reaction [9], the saturation effect on brand relationship is yet to be understood and researched within a specific marketing focus. In order to progress understanding

on the effect of saturation on customer-brand relationship and firms' abilities to co-create values with their customers, the following discusses propositions that are important to future theoretical and empirical studies.

7.1. Saturation and customers' experience in online communities

Customer experience in online brand communities is primarily influenced by the nature of interaction within the community (see [77]), the quality of information exchanged (see [19, 77]), similarities between members [78], and the system quality. These key components of customer experience are essential to customers' commitment to the online brand community and the success of brand engagement and relationship on these communities [79].

Social interactions between members are essential for the existence of online communities themselves [80]. Online communities are defined as being relational communities concerned primarily with social interaction among their members [20]. Online communities are governed by social exchanges involving the production and consumption of thoughts and opinions, and meeting personal and shared goals [21, 81]. Members' interaction leads to "*sociation*" which involves sharing common resources such as experiences [25]. Social interaction is particularly vulnerable to the effect from customer saturation. The high processing effort or communication load can lead to unsustainable interactions within the online community and hence to ending the participation [76].

Information quality refers to the "*quality of the information provided by the online services*" [82, p. 123]. In an information system, information quality is a key success determinant as users depend on it in the absence of face-to-face contact [82, 83]. From an online brand community point of view, consumers initially join online communities primarily because of an interest in brand-related information [84], which will make a community viable over time [85, 86]. Information quality has been widely empirically studied focusing on dimensions such as accuracy, timeliness, completeness and relevance (see [18]), perceived usefulness and perceived importance. Within online context, the quality of the information is used to evaluate the website's effectiveness and for consumers to compare different products that will lead to a purchase decision. Furthermore, online personalization in online communities provides accuracy and timely information to customers leading to additional sales generation [87] and loyalty toward a retailer. Thus, the quality of the information becomes a crucial factor affecting the consumer's behavior when making their decisions [88].

Information quality is also a main influencer of members' return or continuous visits to online communities [19, 42]. In order to remain sustainable and successful, online communities have to have high quality content [89]. Furthermore, in online brand communities, information is considered to be the main source of value that is accumulated in the community and accrued to its members [77, 90]. People use online communities to build relationships and share personal information about themselves [91]. This self-disclosure is directly related to the quality and credibility of the shared information [92].

The perceived level of the value of the information affects the relationship between members and the community [77, 90]. Exerting a high control over communication content in an online

community can limit the perceived value of the shared communication and hence reduce members' commitment to the community [24]. Information quality had a statistically significant effect on community commitment [93]. Furthermore, if the quality of the information is low, members of an online community might hesitate using it and might leave it for another community [31]. Low quality of information shared within online brand communities can further negatively contribute to the consumer's behavior leading to more annoyance. Thus, low information quality undermines members' experience within the online brand communities. Less relevant information increases members' feeling of being overloaded with low quality of information that then has to be filtered, thus occupying important time and emotional space while weakening members' experience within the community.

The quality of the experience in online brand communities is affected by similarities between members. Individuals with strong relationships and social ties have a higher similarity feeling [94] and tend to interact more frequently with each other [95]. This sense of group identification and membership is based on a social capital that members invest in [96]. In an online community, these individuals are predisposed to a higher level of understanding and interaction [26]. Conversely, affection similarity—the tendency for persons who associate to have a level of similar attributes within a group [97]—is deduced through emotional engagement and interaction [98].

System quality (the online community's platform) is a key success determinant of information system (IS) [18] as it acts as a facilitator to effectively convey the shared information [99]. System quality is widely discussed in the online community literature (see [19, 99]). System quality is a measure of information processing, covering the reliability of the computer system holding the information, the online response time, and the ease of use of the system [100]. The higher quality of the system used by the online brand community, the more likely that customer experience is more positive. We argue that these components of customers' experience in online brand communities are essential for maintaining a positive experience that is important for sustaining strong brand relationship on these communities.

Proposition 1: Customers' experience in online brand communities positively enhance and strengthen customer-brand relationship.

However, Proposition 1 would be undermined by a strong presence of customers' saturation in the online brand community that would negatively affect customer experience. In an online brand community, it is argued that the more actively members participate and add to the information load, the greater rate the community loses members [101]. Hutter et al. [102] confirmed this by empirically demonstrating that annoyance negatively affects commitment to an online brand community leading to negative word of mouth. Moreover, sustainable interaction in online communities can be constrained by information overload [76]. The high processing effort or communication load will lead to unsustainable interactions within the online community bringing an end to customers' participation [76, 103]. Therefore, the following is proposed:

Proposition 2: Customers' saturation negatively influences customers' online community experience.

7.2. Customer saturation, brand relationship and value co-creation

Developing a relationship with consumers has never been more crucial and valuable for firms than today. While brand-consumer relationship building is essential for driving loyalty and consumer engagement (see [78, 104], which leads to greater market shares [105] and higher consumer retention [106], the relationship model in an online socially connected setup becomes much more vital for firms to integrate within their overall marketing planning model [49, 107, 108].

The true value of the brand relationship is argued to be rather in the co-creation process based on the active participation of consumers [45, 109] and their experience [110, 111]. While some studies have started to focus on the consumer's experience in brand relationships [112, 113], the literature is still fragmented on the overall brand-consumer relationship [2] from both a value co-creation and consumer experience approach [114, 115]. Value co-creation within the brand relationship literature is enhanced by the encounters or engagement between the brand and its consumers [110] and can be under different forms such as being based on an emotional engagement or new product design [116, 117]. Nonetheless, we argue that online brand communities, within which strong brand relationship exists, help the co-creation of value allowing customers to engage more fruitfully. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 3: Brand relationship in online brand communities positively increases value co-creation.

It is well established that brand association in social networking sites taking the form of both direct and indirect endorsements [49, 108] becomes part of people's digital identity [60] and the brand becomes tied or closely related to the characteristics of the people who associated themselves with it [118]. Yet, brand association and customers' identification with the brand in online communities may be threatened by high level of saturation amongst members of the community. Customers that are saturated and overloaded with a firm's communication practices can have a desire for revenge [119] or avoidance [120]. The desire for revenge can be translated in negative word of mouth [119, 121] and public complaining in online communities [122]. As for the desire for avoidance, it can lead members to reduce their relationship with the brand and withdraw themselves from any interaction with the firm in the online community [123]. In both desire cases, it is expected that the result will lead to a decline, disengagement then dissolution of the consume relationship with the brand [124, 125]. We, therefore, argue the following:

Proposition 4: Customers' saturation in online brand communities negatively affects customer-brand relationship in these communities.

7.3. Customer saturation and value co-creation

Marketing is translated into conversations within the same scale of mass marketing [126]. These conversations are mainly driven through consumer-to-consumer interactions and engagement around a shared consumption activity around the brand [43] within norms of reciprocity [127] leading potentially to value co-creation [32, 47, 128]. Consumer engagement, a key driver in building and enhancing brand-consumer relationship, nonetheless has also

been under-researched in online brand communities [129], especially in relation to value co-creation.

Value co-creation stems from the different social and brand interactions within online communities. With the sheer amount of information and online conversations, the online community becomes a source of consumer's behavior insights that firms would be interested in analyzing to increase their customer satisfaction and develop new products and services [32, 44, 47]. The co-created value is dependent on the firm's objective, which leverages its online community members as a resource, co-producer, product tester, or product user [47]. In addition, the co-created value within online brand communities would seriously be susceptible to the level of customers' saturation. We argue that saturation can directly and significantly reduce customers' and firms' abilities to engage in a meaningful co-creation of value as well as indirectly through weakening brand relationship, which can ultimately make co-creation of value meaningless to customers. Therefore, we propose that

Proposition 5: Customers' saturation in online brand communities negatively influences the co-creation of value.

8. Conclusion and future research

Customer saturation is an important area that has not been theoretically or empirically examined within the marketing literature. Given the lack of understanding on the concept of customer saturation in online brand communities, this study started by establishing the necessary early understanding on this important concept by combining various streams of marketing literature. It is clear from the existing literature that customer saturation in online brand communities is likely to impact three key areas, namely customer experience in these communities, customers-brand relationship with these communities, and customers' abilities to engage in value co-creation within these communities. The discussion and review of the current literature produces five important propositions (see **Figure 1**). These propositions are significant in that the current literature lacks any empirical examination of these. Thus, future studies should pay attention to these research propositions and aim at examining these within online brand communities.

Since the above literature discussion shows that customer saturation has two sources, mainly information overload and time pressure, future studies should consider the following: firstly, explore the concept of customer saturation and its underlying dimensions. The two identified types of saturation, information overload and time pressure, may not be the only dimensions of customer saturation. Thus, exploring the concept in more depth should help the understanding of the effect of saturation on online brand communities and brand relationship within these communities.

Secondly, customer experience in online brand communities is essential to the success of these brand communities. Therefore, future studies should carefully examine the type of customer experience that is affected by saturation. In the above literature discussion, we identified four

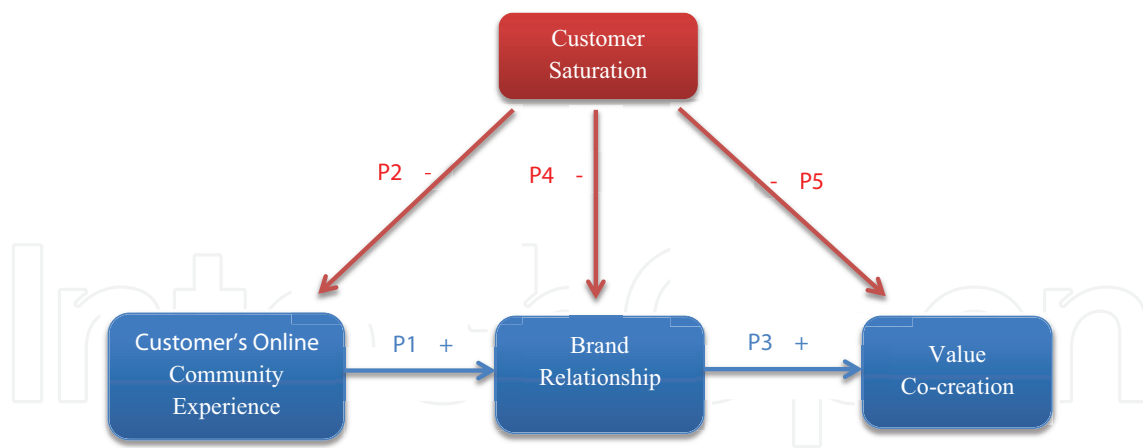


Figure 1. The conceptual model on the role of saturation in online brand communities.

types of customer experience (social interaction, similarities with members, information quality, and system quality) directly linked to customer experience in online brand communities. Future studies need not only to examine the relationship between these types and customer saturation, but further explore other types of customer experience in online brand communities that may exist, yet have not been identified in the literature, and may be influenced by customer saturation. In addition, the further examination of the effect of customer experience on brand relationship in online brand communities under the influence of customer saturation is needed.

Thirdly, while there are existing studies that examined the relationship between brand relationship and value co-creation (see [110]), examining the relationship between these two variables under the influence of customer saturation within online brand communities will not only contribute to the literature on these two variables but will significantly contribute to the growing area of online brand communities. Needless to say that direct examination of the impact of customer saturation on brand relationship and value co-creation is important.

Overall, the current understanding on customer saturation is very limited. Branding and brand literature lacks such understanding. While there are few studies that look at the negative impact of brand relationship in online brand communities (see [102]), the negative impacts of customer saturation need more attention from scholars in this area.

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